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THOMAS HARDY AS A TEACHER OF HIS AGE

BY HERBERT L. STEWART

FROM time to time we read in the table of contents of a great English Review that within the covers will be found a poem by "Thomas Hardy, O.M." The last of the great Victorians is still with us. He is not "Sir" Thomas Hardy; let us trust he never will be. Knighthoods do not beseem the men of his class. Yet there is something that strikes the imagination in the singular Degree he wears,—that Order of Merit which looks so moderate, so non-committal, and yet, when veraciously bestowed, so decorative beyond the tawdry titles that reward political cunning or calculated munificence.

That Hardy in his long literary life has triumphantly merited, all who know his work must acknowledge. Forty-six years have passed since he published his first novel. Some seventeen volumes of prose and verse have been produced since then, varying of course in distinction, but hardly one of which the reader can lay down without having felt the impact of a powerful mind. Disraeli has told us that there are books on closing which we seem to have made a great mental leap, that the spirit of the supreme author can give us even through a single volume a permanent increase of intellectual flexibility. Some such effect will be produced upon many persons by a first acquaintance with *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, or *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Hardy's books have an appalling moral, and it may be hoped that few of his readers will become convinced of the thesis which he aims to prove. But this does not destroy his value. His force is felt by reaction, by the outcry which he provokes, by the passionate demand for someone to refute him. He brings home with unsurpassed vividness an eternal problem, the problem of the human struggle with circumstance, making us try to think it out more sincerely and less superficially

than ever before. The Wessex Novels are, from one point of view, a prolonged argument about Providence. Dealing with them on this aspect alone, the present article will attempt to show some features of their strength and of their weakness.

I

Our author's world-theory is a dark, pessimistic determinism. His has been in a remarkable degree the *tragic* genius working through fiction, and his tragedy is not lit up by the slightest gleam of ultimate hope. Everywhere he depicts mankind as held in the grasp of ineluctable fate. What he sees in the world is a perpetual grappling with one's evil star, and the probability that nine times out of ten the evil star will win. If a minority of human beings seem to have triumphed over circumstance, they have done so not because they deserved to triumph; in "this sorry world,"¹ desert is the poorest guarantee of success, and he who backs a cause for no stronger reason than that it is just is taking as wild an off-chance as the most reckless gambler on the turf. For Hardy is persuaded that there is no moral guidance of human affairs, that no plan of righteousness is being fulfilled, that no kindly goal is being approached. The gods are constantly loading the dice against poor mankind.

Aristotle spoke of the tragic dramatist as presenting a hero whose downfall is due to some error or frailty, and as doing this to cleanse the spectator's mind through pity and fear. If Aristotle meant that the hero must be shown as bringing his calamities upon himself, and that the drama is to warn us against going wrong as he did, Hardy would protest that tragic things have a far deeper root than the Greek philosopher knew, and that no such warnings can be of any avail. He drives home his point by setting forth situation after situation where an all too natural sequence of events has led an innocent victim to unredeemed and unredeemable misfortune. One may object that faults are obvious in the hero or heroine who is thus undone, but he will reply that "it is not in anybody's power to feel the truth of golden opinions while it is possible to profit by them," and that Saint Augustine's address to God had a deeper meaning than the saint thought of, "Thou hast counselled a better course than Thou hast permitted."² The endings

¹ Preface to *The Woodlanders*.

² *Tess*, XV.

of the novels are studiously and often distressingly unhappy. There is no poetic justice, no pandering to the demands of the moral sense. For our author is a realist, less concerned with the justice that is poetic than with the injustice that is actual, not so anxious to show how conscience respects as how Nature outrages the moral standard. The tragedy in his plots is not like that of *Macbeth*, where a man's sin finds him out. It is rather like that of *Othello*, where accidents conspire to defeat the best intention and to exclude any result except what is hopelessly cruel. Poor Tess struggled hard, and remained throughout in every rational sense of the term, Hardy would say, a pure woman. Yet every step she took was deeper into the mire, until the last scene on the gallows when "the President of the Immortals had his sport out." The relation of the sexes, in which an endearing tie is thought to transfigure the stern destinies of mankind, reveals itself as one of the most fertile sources of human misery. Its possibilities have been made tantalizingly great, that our defeat might be the more poignant. The loves of Clym Yeobright and Eustacia, of Swithin St. Cleeve and Viviette, of Stephen and Elfride, go all awry, and we cannot tell just where the blame is to be assigned.

One may compare Hardy with another great novelist by pointing out how the teaching of George Eliot that the way of transgressors is hard becomes supplemented with the doctrine that the way of the upright is hard, too, and that there is little to choose between their respective lots.¹ Men and women are led to their undoing by what is good in them just as much as by what is evil. "The gods are just," says Edgar in *King Lear*, "and of our pleasant vices make instruments to scourge us." Not so, says Hardy. The gods are unjust, and we are equally scourged for those virtues which we have striven to preserve through such difficulty and such pain. If this be true, pessimism has no further to go, and indeed the Promethean rebelliousness against fate never had a more powerful spokesman than in the writer of *Jude* and *Tess*. Nothing in Byron surpasses the bitter eloquence with which the cosmic order is there arraigned, and our novelist has a

¹ But cf. George Eliot's remark in *Silas Marner*, Chap. I, "If there is an angel who records the sorrows of men as well as their sins, he knows how many and how deep are the sorrows that spring from false ideas, for which no man is culpable."

moral background which Byron too often lacked. He never makes us think of him as Carlyle thought of the creator of Manfred, meditating how unworthy was God's universe to have so distinguished a resident.¹ What Hardy keeps reminding us is that poor human beings had never asked for life on any terms, much less on such terms as have been forced upon them. Solomon had said that all is vanity; alas! would that "vanity" were an adequate description! Is it not likewise injustice, exaction, death? That was a grim satire of the poet when he spoke of trailing clouds of glory at our birth. To how many was birth "an ordeal of degrading personal compulsion, whose gratuitousness nothing in the result seemed to justify, and at best could only palliate."² Hardy's own conviction is very much the same as that of poor Mrs. Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, as she plodded along in the shade of the hedge, thinking anything possible at the hands of Time and Chance, "except, perhaps, fair play."³

He anticipates that this sombre outlook upon life will become more and more widely accepted as the race becomes more thoughtful, more fully apprised of its position, more candidly responsive to the logic of facts. A chronic melancholy, he declares, has already shown itself with decline of belief in a beneficent Power.⁴ This must affect our ideas of the beautiful in Nature, it must even make into an anachronism that beauty in the human countenance which can only be kept up by the radiantly hopeful. In a great passage of *The Return of the Native* we have a precise inversion of the teaching of Wordsworth, that men should contemplate the world of natural things in order to renew their inward joys. Rather must the gloom of thought spread itself more and more over objects outside us, until we become irritated by an obtrusively beautiful landscape. "Smiling champagnes of flowers and fruit . . . are permanently harmonious only with an existence of better reputation as to its issues than the present." "The time draws near, if it has not actually arrived, when the chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more thinking among man-

¹ *Tess*, LI.

² Essay entitled *Corn Law Rhymes*.

³ *Mayor of Casterbridge*, I.

⁴ *Tess*, XVIII.

kind."¹ When he would make us realize the frivolous waywardness of Eustacia Vye, Hardy suggests that she would have been a model goddess, and that if she had been entrusted for a while with the control of the world, few would have noticed any change in its government. There would have been the same inequality of lot, the same heaping of favors here and of contumely there, the same perpetual dilemmas, the same arbitrary alternation of caresses and blows.² Ideal Greek beauty went with Greek sanguineness of temperament.³ It would fade when men had become disillusioned. The lines and wrinkles would come even in youth, "if youth but knew."

But ought youth to be told? In his little poem, *The Problem*, Hardy asks himself this. There are so many, young in thought if not in years, who will never "know," unless the saddening knowledge is pressed upon them.

Shall we conceal the Case, or tell it—
We who believe the evidence?
Here and there the watch-towers knell it
With a sullen significance,
Heard of the few who hearken intently and
Carry an eagerly upstrained sense.

Hearts that are happiest hold not by it;
Better we let then the old view reign;
Since there is peace in it, why decry it?
Since there is comfort, why disdain?
Note not the pigment the while that the painting
Determines humanity's joy and pain.

But such a mood of reticence is very exceptional. Tennyson had written "Leave thou thy sister while she prays," and Angel Clare thought such advice more musical than honest.⁴ Hardy thinks the same, and devotes himself to making the world face the cold facts, without the merciful illusion by which a weaker age sustained its nerve. In the terrible lines, "God-Forgotten", he depicts a messenger sent from earth to the presence of the Most High, to report that this globe still

¹ *The Return of the Native*, II.

² *Ibid.*, VII.

³ Hardy is unfortunate in his Greek allusions. There was a deep note of sadness in the temperament he thought so sanguine. Cf. Professor Butcher's essay, *The Melancholy of the Greeks*. Again, our novelist has the astounding statement that in Homer sexual love has no element of sympathy and friendship! (*Two on a Tower*, XXXV.)

⁴ *Tess*, XXVII.

remains in its sorrow and its suffering, apparently ignored by Providence altogether. By degrees God comes to recall that amid millions of similar shapes the thing called Earth was created by Him, but it lost His interest from the first, and surely long since must have perished. At all events, no voice from its inhabitants ever reaches His ear. And in the words addressed to Time, as the Earth's charred remains are drifting through space, regret is acknowledged that Creation was ever carried out at all:

Written indelibly
On my eternal mind
Are all the wrongs endured
By Earth's poor patient kind,
Which my too oft unconscious hand
Let enter undesigned.
No god can cancel deeds foredone
Or thy old coils unwind.

As when in Noë's day
I whelmed the plains with sea,
So at this last when flesh
And herb but fossils be,
And, all extinct, their piteous dust
Revolves obliviously,
That I made Earth, and life, and man,
It still repenteth me!¹

A word may here be said about the common but very misleading view that Hardy is a herald of revolt in the sense of proclaiming Nature's blessed freedom against the suffocating restraints of conventional morality. The superficial reader is sure to understand him so, and of course passages may be quoted in abundance where social orthodoxy is shocked to its basis. But our novelist does not belong to the silly tribe that exhausts itself in denouncing "convention." His skepticism is far more thorough, and his despair far more complete.

Tom Moore was no moralist, but he was a very considerable wit, and in one of his delightful translations from Anacreon he has poked fun at those who would guide conduct by appealing to "Nature." He points out that the earth draws moisture from the sky, and transmits it to the thirsty plant; that the sea receives the evening vapors, and the morning sun draws up the ocean's tears:

¹ *By the Earth's Corpse.*

Then hence with all your sober thinking!
 Since Nature's holy law is drinking;
 I'll make the laws of Nature mine,
 And pledge the universe in wine.

Perhaps we are not taken very much beyond this moral standpoint when Sue tells Jude in the shepherd's hut that she rejoices to have got away from all laws except those of germination and gravitation, or when the novelist himself remarks that Tess amid the sleeping birds and the skipping rabbits should have had no sense of guilt, for although she had broken a social rule she was in accord with the rules of this natural environment. There is much more force in the sneer at the convention which so outraged Nature's equality as to punish the unfortunate babe with burial in unconsecrated ground, "in that shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid."

But Hardy knows that impulse and positive law do good alike, and do harm alike. Nor will he allow that there is any higher unity in which they can be reconciled or can supplement each other. Follow either, or follow both in any imaginable combination which may commend itself to you, and this wretched tangle which we call life will in the end be confounded. It is not only man-made convention which will thwart your instincts. Your instincts will thwart and nullify one another, so that when any one of them seems on the point of winning its reward a second will obtrude to spoil it. The things we do for the best turn out to have been for the worst, and those we thought to benefit we manage in our ignorance deeply to wrong. So, looking back, like Tess, on a life of heroic endeavor, we have to say that the fates have been too cunning for us, and that our virtues no less than our vices had better never have been.

II

The usual retorts to pessimism have been hurled at Hardy in abundance. He has been called a morbid and perverse exaggerator. He has been reminded how all things seem yellow to the jaundiced eye. His plots have been impeached as bringing together a multitude of accidents that a tragic effect may be precipitated, however improbable each accident

may be in itself, and however incredible may be their coincidence. He is accused of slurring over the moral defects of his heroes and heroines, and thus exhibiting as remorseless fate what was in truth the outcome of heinous individual sin. The smart aphorists have imputed to him the maxim, "Of two evils choose both." A vein of fleshliness has been detected in him, and some wit has advised him to rename his most questionable book *Jude the Obscure*. We hear that as a so-called realist he is a fraud, for reality is at worst a mixture of joy and sorrow, while for him it is uniform in its excruciations. Sometimes his liver is suspected, and the critics tell him, in the words of Sterne to Smollett,¹ to make his complaint upon life not to the world, but to his physician.

Those who face Hardy's problem on the more philosophic plane have been showing a tendency to arraign the whole view that the cosmic order must be justified or condemned by its conduciveness to a happy lot for mankind. This was Nietzsche's famous retort to Schopenhauer, whom he called a decadent, and to John Stuart Mill, whose "vulgarity" sought the greatest happiness of the greatest number. To Zarathustra this quest was a poor thing, characteristic of "the last man" when the nerve of heroism should have snapped, and the arrow of longing should no longer be launched. "We have discovered happiness; so saith the last man, and blinketh."²

These critics of Hardy, while they say much that is true, have quite missed the real mark. Our author does often exaggerate, does seem wilfully to leave out a great deal of that light by which the shades of human fortune are crossed and relieved. Regarded as a complete transcript of life the Wessex Novels are not true. Marriages are not all unhappy; a great proportion of really idyllic unions can be seen in the cities and villages which we all know. There is not invariably a malignant demon lying in wait, like the Providence in *Blanco Posnet*, to bring confusion upon those who trust in human nature. The lucky coincidences by which an amiable novelist makes hero and heroine come out right in the end are seldom more improbable than those wretched coincidences by which everything is spoiled in *Two on a Tower* or *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. It is not unfair to call *Jude* an hysterical

¹ In *The Sentimental Journey*.

² *Zarathustra*, Prologue V.

performance. Most of the victims in it are far from innocent; they pay the price for their disregard of common sense.

To say all this does not, however, touch the main point. No novelist is called upon to depict the whole of life, and no novelist has done so. One is entitled to seize upon some single important aspect, and set this in isolation before his readers, that it may become distinct and impressive. To "exaggerate" is inevitable; you must do so by the mere abstracting of one element from its place in a concrete whole. But the reader can allow for this. And the risk is much reduced where, as in Hardy's work, the abstraction is not that of one aspect from the rest within a single experience, but of the experience of one sort of persons from the experience of others. Neither half of the world knows how the other half lives, and both halves cannot be shown with effect on a single canvas. As Jude lay in agony on his deathbed, perhaps the two clergymen of different views who stood below his window "discussing the eastward position" thought life on the whole a very pleasant thing. But Jude's case was not satisfactorily compensated by this. Walt Whitman's picture of the animals who do not lie awake at night and grieve over their sins is not an offset to the picture of Luther writhing on the floor of his cell. If Shakespeare had written nothing but *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, he would not have been fairly accused of traducing life, although he would have presented only a part of it. And Hardy himself has at least shown the brighter side in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Perhaps he has even attempted poetic justice in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Certainly the so-called "sunny" novelists could be reproached with just as much point for having executed a torso.

Of still less force is it to argue that suffering may be as poignant, as purposeless, and as irremediable, as the Wessex Novels allege, and yet the goodness of the universe remain unaffected. A recent article quotes, as a sort of triumphant refutation out of Hardy's own mouth, these lines:

Let me enjoy the world no less
Because the all-enacting Might
That fashioned forth its loveliness
Had other aims than my delight.

The critic might have noticed with profit that the poem in which this stanza occurs has the sardonic comment after

its title, "Minor Key." And the criticism that relies on it is pitched in a very minor key indeed. It is the tone of Callicles in Matthew Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna":

And why is it that still
 Man with his lot thus fights?
 'Tis that he makes this will
 The measure of his rights,
 And believes Nature outraged if his will's gainsaid.

The whole case for pessimism has been admitted if we suppose such a non-moral Power, using poor human creatures as so much worthless material for a purpose that lies beyond them. To keep our nerve before such a panorama, we must then just look away from the parts of it which we cannot bear! But why keep our nerve at all? And in what sense of the word "justice" shall we look upon this spectacle as just? Such morality, as our novelist would say, "may be good enough for divinities, but it is scorned by average human nature."

The real weakness of Hardy's position is quite different. It lies in that astonishing paradox with which each book leaves us, a paradox unsolved, and becoming, if possible, more insoluble the farther we read. Everywhere we have on the one hand a clear-cut cosmic theory, and everywhere we have on the other hand a fierce moral protest. But if the protest is well-grounded the theory must be false, while if the theory is true the protest becomes unmeaning. There is no fact of which Hardy is so sure as of the noble elements in mankind, none upon which he has laid such passionate emphasis as upon justice and mercy and unselfishness and generous impulse. For him these are the supreme values. Yet his theoretic effort has been to build a world-scheme in which the moral struggle of humanity is discredited, doomed to failure, even shown to be absurd. If we *feel* with him, we shall regard the whole material universe as of little account compared with the finer aspects of character. If we *think* with him, man will appear to us so inconceivably feeble in the cosmic mechanism that it is small matter what he does, what emotions he may cherish, in what direction he may aspire. Kant himself has not revealed to us with greater sharpness the opposition between conscience and fate. But what Kant offers us as the problem to be solved, Hardy treats as the solution to be accepted.

An illustration of this may be given from a very suggestive remark about Angel Clare. When he tries to overcome one of Tess's scruples about *les convenances*, the novelist says of him: "To his cosmopolitan mind such deviations from the social norm, so immense to domesticity, were no more than the irregularities of vale and mountain chain to the whole terrestrial curve." The travelled man smiles at the conscience of a village girl. What will be the moral attitude of the man whose horizon has been widened, not by roaming to Brazil, but by absorbing a mechanistic creed about the universe and about life? What is likely to happen to the most ardent moral convictions, when they are understood as by-products of a morally indifferent world-machine? The likeness of the mountain and the terrestrial curve will be far too faint to bring home such disproportion. As Mr. Balfour has asked, what place can we give to the instincts we thought so exalted, when we learn that they have come to us because, after innumerable aeons, there chanced to be born a "race with conscience enough to know that it is vile, and intelligence enough to know that it is insignificant"?¹ But Hardy draws no such inference. For him justice must be done though the heavens fall. Though he thinks that to be born is a "palpable dilemma" and that humanity's purpose should now be, not that of advancing in life with glory but that of retreating out of it without shame,² yet glory and shame are still eternal verities. Those who have learned his lesson may well ask him why, and call on him to take them either backwards or forwards.

Our novelist has at least once recognized this difficulty. It is in that curious little poem, *New Year's Eve*, where God is questioned about His reasons for making so painful a world. Its joys, such as they are, would never have been missed by anyone if creation had not taken place, and all its sorrows would have been spared. The reply given is that no purpose, either good or bad, was ever entertained, that such a distinction is unintelligible except by mere men, and that it remains a puzzling enigma how the creature could have a moral quality of which the creating Power is destitute. No one can tell how such a questioning mood could have sprung up at all from the action of the Machine.

¹ *Foundations of Belief*.

² *The Return of the Native*, IV, ..

Then He: "My labors—logicless—
You may explain, not I:
Sense-sealed I have wrought, without a guess
That I evolved a Consciousness
To ask for reasons why.

"Strange that ephemeral creatures who
By my own ordering are,
Should see the shortness of my view,
Use ethic tests I never knew,
Or made provision for!"

Yet the ethic tests are here, and in none more imperious than in Hardy himself. The same Power that made the volcano must have made them, and our novelist has taught us—none more eloquently—how much grander they are than volcanoes. Do they not belong to the heart of things? The Preface to *Two on a Tower* tells us that our novelist designed there "to set the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe, and to impart to readers the sentiment that of these contrasting magnitudes the smaller might be the greater to them as men." Is not that within us which so judges the perspective the surest intuition we have? And does it not perhaps bring us our most "authentic tidings of invisible things"? The riddle for all those who at present make so much of the mystery of pain lies just here, that only for those who take what is essentially a religious view of the world is that mystery acute, so that those whom it troubles most are bearing unconscious witness to the faith which they cannot accept.

Here, then, we take our leave of this strong, but so heavily burdened soul, upon whom, more than ever upon Wordsworth, there has pressed the weary weight of an unintelligible world. The agony of Europe in the Napoleonic war used to be Hardy's crowning example that the Immanent Will which is his substitute for God

works unconsciously as heretofore
Eternal artistries in circumstance.

He has a more spectacular illustration to-day, although in truth to the discerning mind the problem of evil is not generically different on the battle front in Flanders and in the life tragedies of a mean street. He who can solve the one can solve the other, and none of us can solve either. But

we forsake our only possible clue if we let go that trust in Good without which the heroism is taken out of both; and heroism is the last thing that we can or that we dare explain away. Here is the one standing-place which has never quite failed mankind, and if we are to see through the darkness at all, it is from this point that we must look. Despite his desolating argument, Hardy at heart holds by this with more tenacity than many a moralist who decries him. And though his doctrine would be in the end the negation of his own deepest spirit, it is nothing new to have found one whose soul is nobler than his system, or to have reverified the truth that

There lives more faith in honest doubt
Believe me than in half the creeds.

HERBERT L. STEWART.